BODY IMAGE

Your body image refers to how you think and feel about your body, and what you think it looks like.

This may have nothing to do with your actual appearance. Body image is more about perception than reality, particularly for self-conscious teenagers. Poor body image can have a range of negative effects, including eating disorders, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

There are a number of associated problems with negative body image that can surface in the time of adolescence. These include: crash dieting, and eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, and even steroid use among young men.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO PROMOTE A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE?

There are three broad strategies that parents can use to promote a positive body image in their young people. They involve role modelling, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and helping them feel confident about themselves.

BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL

Show them how to eat and live healthily:
- Don't crash diet. Studies show that many young people think that crash dieting is a harmless and effective way to lose weight. Talk to your child about the dangers of crash dieting.
- Accept your own body size and shape. Don't complain about ‘ugly’ body parts or, at least, don’t share your opinions with your young person.
- Accept other people’s body sizes and shapes. Talk to your young person about all the different aspects that make up a person, such as personality, skills and outlook on life.
- Exercise regularly. Have at least one family activity per week that involves some kind of exercise; for example, bushwalking, dancing, playing backyard cricket, going for a walk or swimming.
- Be critical of media messages and images that promote thinness. Encourage your young person to question and challenge Western society’s narrow ‘beauty ideal’.

PROMOTE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Focus on what your body can do, rather than what it looks like. Suggestions include:
- Make your family an active one. Exercise yourself and encourage your young person to exercise with you.
- Emphasise fitness, health and enjoyment as the motivations for exercise rather than weight loss or weight management.
- Help them find a team sport. Team sports encourage teamwork, competition and mastery of physical skills.
- Being overweight is a known trigger of poor body image so encourage regular exercise to maintain a healthy body weight.
- Be wary of sports that have a strong emphasis on thinness - for example, gymnastics and ballet. Vulnerable children may feel pressured to lose weight.

HELP THEM FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT THEMSELVES

A strong sense of identity and self-worth are crucial to your child’s self-esteem. Suggestions include:
- Encourage problem solving, expression of opinions and individuality.
- Acknowledge their worries about appearance. Puberty, in particular, can be a worrying time. Reassure your child that their physical changes are normal and that everyone develops at different times and rates.
- Never tease them about their weight, body shape or looks. Even seemingly friendly nicknames can be hurtful if they focus on some aspect of a child's appearance.
- Focus on their achievements and talents so they learn to focus on activity rather than appearance.
- Make your child feel they have an important role in the family. For instance, give them age-appropriate household tasks. Tell them what a valuable contribution they make to the running of the house.
- Focus on grooming and developing an appropriate dress sense that accounts for modern fashion and also maximises their body type.

KEEP IN MIND

1. Parents’ positive example about body image and a healthy lifestyle are perhaps the most powerful influences on how their young people view themselves.
2. Help young people dispel the media myths of the perfect body. Bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Focus on what it can do, rather than how it looks.
3. If you are at all concerned about your child’s body image, self-esteem or eating behaviours, consult with your doctor for information and referral.